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The sinking of the 'entire Delaware Navy'

By P. J. WINGATE

The firing of a military gun for salute or ceremonial purposes usually takes place without difficulties. But not always.

On February 28, 1844, President John Tyler invited over 200 guests to accompany him on a brief cruise down the Potomac River on the warship Princeton to see and hear its great new naval gun, called the "Peacemaker," fire a series of salutes. Everything went well for the first two shots but on what was to have been the third and final salute the "Peacemaker" blew up, killing Secretary of the Navy Thomas Gilmer, Secretary of State Abel Upshur, U.S. Senator David Gardiner and five other people. President Tyler might have been included among the dead had he not delayed coming up on deck from the banquet room for that last shot.

It was, of course, a sensational piece of news and accounts of it can be found in the history books as well as in yellowed file copies of all the major newspapers of that time.

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Another less well known mishap from a ceremonial gun occurred in Charleston Harbor on April 14, 1861, just after Fort Sumter had surrendered to Confederate General P. G. T. Beauregard. The fort, under the command of Major Robert Anderson, had endured 34 hours of continuous bombardment without suffering an injury of any kind or inflicting any on the Confederates when Anderson decided to surrender because he was running out of food and drinking water and it was clear that the Union fleet, out some distance in the harbor, could not come to his rescue. Why he then decided to fire a hundred salvo "salute to the U.S. flag" has never been fully explained, but he did. Everything went fine for the first 49 shots but on the 50th, a fragment of burning cartridge bag blew back into the main magazine of the fort and blew up all the remaining gunpowder stored there, causing the death of two men, privates Hough and Galloway, and wounding many others. This bizarre ending to the attack on Fort Sumter is also in the history books dealing with the details of the start of the Civil War, but it was rather quickly engulfed by accounts of the much more tragic events that followed in the next four years.

A third startling incident involving a salute gun occurred in the Delaware Bay in 1876, during Grant's second term as President, and is of more interest to Delawareans even though no deaths were involved. However it did cause "the sinking of the entire Delaware Navy," according to the Port Norris (N.J.) Times-Bugle, a weekly newspaper being published there but now long defunct. So far as can be determined, no accounts of this incident ever appeared in any Delaware newspaper and there may have been a good reason. The two Delaware citizens involved, Captain Norris Wheller and First Mate Oscar Johnson, of the Delaware marine patrol vessel "Lettie Lou," did not play heroic roles — at least not according to the Times-Bugle.

The sinking of the "Lettie Lou," or "the entire Delaware Navy," as the Times-Bugle put it, occurred during the one brief "oyster war" between Delaware and New Jersey, and a little background information is in order.

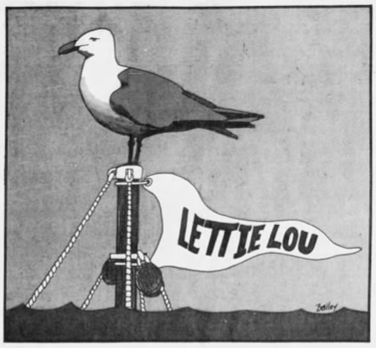
Maryland and Virginia have been famous for oyster wars for over a hundred years, with watermen of those two states fighting each other over the right to take oysters from the Chesapeake Bay, which cuts through both states. A Maryland citizen was slain as late as 1934 in one of these wars.

Delaware and New Jersey share the Delaware Bay, in a somewhat similar fashion, and there was a time when oysters were rather plentiful in the bay although oystering there never was the industry it was in the Chesapeake. The Delaware Bay oysters were rather widely distributed but were most plentiful on the Jersey side, around the mouth of the Maurice River. The town of Bivalve, N.J., got its name from the fact that so many oysters were tonged near there and shipped from Bivalve.

Oysters became a sort of national mania everywhere east of the Mississippi River after the advent of fast trains and refrigerated cars, packed with cracked ice. In fact, the demand for oysters was so great during the period from 1870 to 1890 that the oyster beds off the coast of Massachusetts, Rhode Island and Long Island became almost exhausted, and over 200 oystering vessels from New England invaded the Chesapeake and Delaware Bays. These invaders, plus local boats, took more than 20 million bushels of oysters per year from the two bays, most of them from the Chesapeake, and fortunes were made.

Greenbackville, Va., got its name from the fact that oysters taken from the Chincoteague Bay, nearby, made it a very wealthy village when oysters reached the unprecedented price of $1.40 per bushel during the early 1870s.

Naturally, the competition for all this submerged treasure was intense and the oyster wars between Maryland and Virginia were bloody ones. Delaware and New Jersey oystermen were better behaved. Whether this was because they were more civilized or because the stakes were not so high in the Delaware Bay is open to debate. Nevertheless, frictions did develop and they intensified when Delaware watermen from Lewes and elsewhere sailed over to the area off the mouth of the Maurice and began to dredge up what the Jerseymen thought was theirs as a God-given right.



So some of the Jersey boats began to shoot at the invaders. Apparently the shooting was designed to scare off the Delawareans rather than to kill them because the shots all went through the sails or off the bows of the Delaware boats. Nevertheless, the Delawareans didn't like it and appealed to Governor John Cochran for help.

There was no Delaware Marine Patrol, as we know it today, at that time and the "Lettie Lou," a skipjack under the command of the aforementioned Capt. Wheller was the only state-owned boat on the bay. She was supposed to act as a sort of coast guard for the whole area — a pretty large assignment — and to represent law and order. In this second capacity Capt. Wheller was a deputy sheriff and his vessel carried a rifle and two pistols. In response to Governor Cochran's order, Capt. Wheller and his crew of one, First Mate Johnson, sailed over to the mouth of the Maurice in February 1876 and this was reported in several Delaware papers but that was all. The rest of the story has to be picked out of the Port Norris Times-Bugle.

When the "Lettie Lou" showed up near the Maurice River area, the inhospitable Jerseymen shot at her too, putting half a dozen bullets through her sails and a couple in the wood of her bow. According to the Times-Bugle the "Lettie Lou" left one day after she arrived.

But Captain Wheller was a man of determination and decided to return. He had been, he told the Times-Bugle later, a sergeant of artillery with the Union Army of General George C. Mead at Gettysburg and elsewhere, and he came back with a brass cannon, without its carriage, lashed to a platform near the stern of his vessel. He also had some cannonballs and a supply of "improved" Du Pont gunpowder.

No sooner had Capt. Wheller arrived off the Maurice inlet than he decided to make his presence known by firing a ceremonial shot — not to sink any Jersey boats but to give them an idea of his capabilities. But things went wrong — badly wrong. Whether Capt. Wheller forgot what he had learned during his military service about the recoil of a cannon, or the Du Pont powder had been improved more than he realized or something else went akilter will never be known. In any event, the cannon tore itself loose from its lashing and plunged backward and down through the stern end of the "Lettie Lou," leaving a jagged three-foot hole below the water line. The vessel sank in less than 15 minutes. Captain Wheller and his one man crew were rescued by the Jerseymen he had sought to impress and next day a Jersey boat sailed over to Lewes to return them home. Capt. Wheller probably came home very quietly, with no desire to talk to Delaware newspapers.

But the Times-Bugle had got its story from both the captain and his rescuers, and a reader of its unsigned story can amost see the glint of delight in the eye of the author who wrote: "And thus came to an ignominious end the men who had come over to harrass the honest, God-fearing workmen of our fair city. It seems only just retribution that the entire Delaware Navy was sunk by a single shot."

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These three incidents are so bizarre that some people may be inclined to doubt they ever happened. Some may even be willing to bet they never happened, but if you ever encounter such would-be bettors, take them up at once. You can collect the money easily in the first two cases by referring them to the biography of John Tyler called "And Tyler Too," written by Robert Seager and published in 1963 by McGraw-Hill, and "Storm Over Sumter" by Roy Meredith and published by Simon and Shuster in 1957.

The third case will be more difficult to document because apparently the only records of it in existence are the yellowed copies of the Port Norris Times-Bugle now in the files of the South Jersey Historical Society near Cape May. In addition, it must be remembered that the Times-Bugle claims that it all happened on April 1, 1876.

P.J. Wingate is a retired Du Pont vice president who lives in Centreville. Writing is his hobby.

Fantasy by Bob Leary

The Air Force's big umbrella decision

It never rains but it pours. At a time when the very best minds of the United States Air Force are preoccupied with such weighty questions as whether our newest jet fighters can out-duel the Russians' latest, along comes Sen. William Proxmire suggesting they don't know enough to come in out of the rain.

Proxmire, the dollar-conscious Wisconsin Democrat, is up in arms, as it were, because he thinks the taxpayer is being soaked for a $3,000 study to determine whether Air Force men should be allowed to carry umbrellas.

He cites the study as this month's "biggest, most ironic, most ridiculous example of wasteful government spending," adding dryly that "the great umbrella escapade is just the kind of issue that should have been settled by good, old-fashioned military decision-making."

According to a recent Associated Press story, the Air Force uniform board, while allowing women to carry umbrellas, "has consistently decided it would be unprofessional and bad for the image of Air Force men" if this coverage were extended to include them.

That opinion, incidently, is consistent with the attitudes which prevailed in the great civilizations of the past. In ancient Greece and Rome, for example, while women regularly carried umbrellas, it was considered effeminate for men to do so.

However, based upon my long and unprofitable association with the military, I suspect that the problem is not merely a question of maintaining a rugged, we-tough-it-out image of the U.S. Air Force fighting man.

As Britain's Alfred Lord Tennyson once wrote:

The rain it raineth on the just
And also on the unjust fella;
But chiefly on the just, because
The unjust steals the just's umbrella.

That probably sums up the real fear of the Air Force — that from a finely-tuned fighting machine it would rapidly disintegrate into a conglomeration of feuding petty thieves, each bent on lifting another's umbrella and making for the wild blue yonder.

Anyway, the AP story said that the umbrella issue came up again last July and that it was decided that Air Force males could carry umbrellas on a six-month trial basis — but only at the Pentagon.

The test ends at the end of next month when those April showers soon to come your way will begin to pay off with the flowers that bloom in May.

As part of the test, the story said, 1,700 randomly-selected Pentagon-based Air Force males were given a four-page questionnaire to fill out, complete with a Privacy Act warning.

Well, I certainly didn't have the time to query 1,700 people, but I felt it incumbent upon me to find out what I could, so I hustled down to Dover AFB right away to sound out personnel there.

The first person I stopped was a lieutenant colonel.

"Do you think," I asked, "that Air Force men should be allowed to carry umbrellas?"

"Well," he said, "some of us perhaps. If you know anything about the history of umbrellas, you know that in ancient Egypt and Assyria, slaves were employed to hold umbrellas over their masters. It seems to me that it's not asking too much to have all officers over the rank of major assigned an enlisted man as umbrella bearer."

Next I stopped a new recruit who wasn't as wet behind the ears as he looked. "Do you feel that the umbrella is a legitimate article of personal gear for today's Air Force man?" I asked.

"Not unless," he said, "they issue us all bowler hats."

Finally, I stopped a woman sergeant and asked if she thought her male colleagues had a right to remain dry.

"Not merely a right, but a duty," she said. "You should see the piles of empty bottles outside the clubs."

"I beg your pardon," I said. "I was talking about the umbrella question."

"In that case," she said, "to put it another way, James Russell Lowell once observed that 'an umbrella is no protection against a Scotch mist'."

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